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Congress must respond to rising demand for rail

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As we approach another summer with gasoline prices rising above \$3 a gallon, and witness a high-speed rocket train clocking a record 357.2 miles per hour in France, travelers across America are boarding passenger rail trains in record numbers. They are asking a logical question: Why does America continue to provide inadequate funding for passenger rail service?

Amtrak ridership increased again in fiscal year 2006, which ended Sept. 30, with double-digit increases in many corridors. All indications are that 2007 will be yet another record year.

Ridership on trains serving Georgia in 2006 was 157,029 passengers, compared with 141,048 in 2005 – an 11 percent increase. These increases were posted on the Crescent (daily service to New Orleans and New York) and on the Palmetto, the Silver Meteor and the Silver Star (service to New York and Florida destinations).

Similar increases were posted in many regional corridors in all parts of the country.

Why are more and more Americans choosing to travel by train?

Americans are struggling with worsening highway and airline congestion, while fuel prices rise steadily to \$3 a gallon and beyond. Cost-conscious motorists are buying more fuel-efficient cars and abandoning their cars for rail. In the post-9/11 environment, travelers are wary of a system that depends so heavily on airline travel. And an increasing number of travelers are becoming conscious of the pressing issues of excessive energy consumption and environmental pollution. Rail travel provides solutions to all these challenges, and travelers know it.

Americans want transportation alternatives, with rail playing a significant role. The States for Passenger Rail Coalition, of which I am chairman, was founded in 2000 just as we started to see passenger demands for expanded rail service increasing. Today, there are 29 states represented from all parts of the country, and we will continue to make the case for strong state-federal partnerships to expand our nation's passenger rail network.

Passenger rail offers many benefits from a variety of perspectives.

Oak Ridge National Laboratory, which produces the annual Transportation Energy Data Book for the Department of Energy, concludes that inter-city passenger rail consumes 18 percent less energy per passenger mile than airlines and 17 percent less energy than automobiles. In other words, inter-city passenger rail is 18 percent more energy-efficient than planes and 17 percent more efficient than autos.

Less energy consumption results in less pollution per passenger mile.

For too many years, passenger rail service in America has been hamstrung by the year-to-year funding decisions of Congress. If passenger rail is to be a permanent part of our transportation system, why do we debate its future over and over each year in Congress? The uncertainty of the annual appropriation process has made long-term planning for passenger rail improvements extremely difficult.

The States for Passenger Rail Coalition is calling on Congress to provide a dedicated source of capital funding for passenger rail, just as Congress does for highways and aviation. We support federal legislation that gives passenger rail the same 80 percent/20 percent federal-state funding split that the highway system enjoys. It is time to level the playing field for all forms of passenger transportation. Over the past year, I have traveled to Europe and Asia and witnessed how advanced their passenger rail systems are. Frankly, they put us to shame.

Many Americans return from European and Asian cities every year and ask "Why can't an advanced nation like the United States have first-class, high-speed rail travel like the Europeans and Asians enjoy?"

The answer is simple.

If Washington policy-makers would cease bickering over Amtrak and follow their own advice to provide a dedicated source of capital funding, we could have the same level of service available in Europe. We can provide Americans with the level of service they seek and for which they vote as they step aboard passenger trains in record numbers.

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